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# THE HARVARD COURSE

IN

PHOTOPLAY WRITING



UNIT III.

Writing the Synopsis.

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## PREPARING YOUR MANUSCRIPT.

Though this is not of vital importance, you should use paper of the size a business letterhead ( 8-1/2 x 11".) If you typewrite your manuscripts, type double space, as shown here. Leave a margin of 2 inches. Never type or write on both sides of the sheet.

Manuscripts should be mailed flat if possible; if this is not convenient, then folded. On no account must they be rolled. Return postage should always accompany manuscripts, for it is the practice in editorial offices to destroy all unavailable manuscripts which are not accompanied by return postage. And, too, be careful to enclose not only return postage but FULL return postage, as the Post Office Department will no longer accept manuscripts insufficiently stamped.

Write your name and full address in the top left-hand corner of the first page of your manuscript. Then put down your title, and state whether your play is a comedy, tragedy, drama, or farce. Next, on a separate page, set forth your Cast of Characters. Finally, plunge right into your story, and give your Brief Synopsis.

## THE BRIEF SYNOPSIS.

This should give the outline of your play, that

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is, the action of the story, without too much detail. The object is to enable the editor to judge without too much loss of time, whether or not he is interested, at the time the story is submitted to him, in your type of story. The Brief Synopsis should not run over 500 words for a five-reel play.

## THE DETAILED SYNOPSIS.

The Detailed Synopsis is really the story. This is what the editor buys and pays for. The "detailed" means exactly what the word implies. Every single detail of the action must be given, for someone at the studio must write the continuity for your synopsis if bought; and they cannot write continuity from your story unless you give them the story with all its details.

Always remember that a photoplay is a story acted instead of told. When you reflect on this truth, the reason why the universal cry is "ACTION!" will at once become clear to you. You must so present your story that it will be intelligible to the most ignorant person in your audience -- your action must make your story clear. Thus, many of the world's most famous stories of fiction would never make photoplays, because their noble language cannot be reproduced on the screen and the one great essential -- action -- is missing.





The synopsis of your play should be in plain, forceful and direct language; and it is again emphasized here that it must contain all necessary detail. Most producers to-day do not desire the complete play, they maintaining their own staff writers whose mission it is to write the Continuity of Scenes for the synopses bought for production. In order to write an acceptable synopsis, however, it is necessary that you be familiar with Continuity, and that you write the complete play, including the Continuity and subtitles, etc., afterwards rewriting your synopsis from same. This will insure your synopsis containing every single necessary shred of action. To illustrate: In writing a story intended for the screen, it would probably sound quite all right to you to say:

"Richard incurred the anger of his father,  
and was disowned by him."

However, when you come to write the Continuity for this, you will find that you have to show this on the screen, and that you must supply the explanation of the anger of Richard's father; and your detailed synopsis, rewritten from your Continuity, will therefore probably read somewhat as follows:

"Richard that night goes to his club, where he gets drunk, loses heavily at cards, and, unable to meet his gambling debts, forges his father's name to a check , , , , , ." etc.

This will give the studio people something to work from when writing the scenario for the director. (A complete



explanation of the process of Continuity Writing will be found in the Unit entitled CONTINUITY, while the MODEL SCENARIO gives you a complete play in final Continuity form.)

When you reflect that your synopsis will have to be put into Continuity at the studio, you will realize the advantage of having, wherever possible, two parallel lines of action, so that the director can switch from one to the other. For instance:

While the young and loving wife is kissing her husband's photograph as she longingly waits for his return from the office, where he is "working late," he is entertaining the cabaret-dancer at an exclusive restaurant.

By having two lines of action the director is enabled not only to hold the interest of the audience, but also to bridge periods of time.

## THE CHARACTERS.

It should be borne in mind that:-

1. The characters must be suited to the story, and the story to the characters.
2. The characters must be clearly distinguished one from the other.
3. The characters must be self-consistent.

Each incident of the story must seem to grow out of the nature, the disposition, the temperament of the characters; and, on the other hand, the incidents must react on the



characters to produce the result aimed at. Each person must be made to do and say exactly what is appropriate to his character, or he becomes an absurdity. For instance, a character who has been represented all through the play as a person of vicious, unscrupulous character should not be suddenly made to do or say something which only a person of lofty sentiments of ideals would do or say.

## CONTRAST OF CHARACTERS.

Contrast is one of the favorite instruments of dramatic effect. Plays composed entirely of virtuous or vicious characters would be insufferable. Therefore, the characters should be so selected and arranged that in each scene the prominent characteristics of each are made more prominent by contrast with the others. For instance, an avaricious character, like Shylock, stands out much more vividly when a generous nature, like Antonio, is introduced.





## UNITY.

A story must have unity, that is, all the incidents of the story must cluster about a single central idea. If there are two series of incidents, they should be so woven together that, at the end of the story, it will be evident that one could not have taken place without the other. This constitutes the unity of action.

## NOVELTY.

An important requirement is that the story be fresh and original. It has been said that there are no longer any novel plots; still, it must not be forgotten that an old story, told in a new way, possesses all the charm of a new one. It is all a matter of new twists, new situations, novel treatment. Plot material is all around you; in the happenings that come to your notice in the course of your every-day existence, in old newspaper scraps --- anywhere may lurk the germ of a first-class dramatic story which, by applying certain rules and injecting the necessary novelty of treatment, may be made into a successful photoplay.



## INTEREST AND PLEASURE.

The fundamental law of the photoplay is that the story must interest and please. The photoplaywright may point a moral, or discuss a social problem; but these are side-issues. His first and his last business, as a photoplaywright, is to tell such a story, and to tell it in such a way, that his audience will be forced to listen, and, listening, cannot fail to be delighted.

The best stories for dramatic purposes require few presuppositions, and those of a character capable of being implied rather than demanding explicit statement. The story must be of such a character that it can be symmetrically developed. A photoplay is a regular, orderly growth, and a story which consists of a series of episodes following one after the other like knots in a string is of no value for photoplay purposes.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PLAY.

As has been shown, every play is founded on a character, or characters, striving to accomplish some purpose, in which they are opposed by another character or characters. This brings about a CONFLICT OF INTEREST, which increases in intensity as the play progresses. We have, perhaps, a quiet scene, introducing two or three principal characters. All is happiness, when suddenly





appears a character whose mission it is to destroy this peace and happiness. In a moment all is turmoil and consternation. The main action of the play has begun. The virtuous characters strive to maintain or regain their happiness, the villain strives to undermine it. Plot and counter-plot follow swiftly, until the interest culminates in the Climax.

The story, if told in the most direct way, would soon be over. It is therefore necessary to prolong it, to expand it, to give it variety and contrast. Therefore, new characters are introduced at opportune points in such a way that the attention of the audience is not distracted from the main plot. It is necessary here to caution you, however, against introducing episodes or scenes that have no bearing on the main plot. However interesting an episode may be in itself, it should be ruthlessly cast aside unless you can contrive to connect it in some way or other with the current of the story.

## INCIDENTS

The story, when acted on the screen, takes the form of a series of incidents, and the cause of every incident should be apparent in some incident that has gone before and serves as a motive. Every incident should grow naturally out of what has gone before, and lead naturally to what comes after.



In order to escape monotony, you should exercise all your imagination to vary the character of the incidents as they follow one another. Pathos should be varied with flashes of humor; your play, in short, should present new features at every turn.

## SUSPENSE.

The most important and most generally used means of arousing and holding the interest of the audience is suspense; keep your audience in doubt as to what is coming, and you will keep their interest at white heat. The suspense should be gradually increased to the culminating point, which is called the Climax. The situation concluding the climax generally takes the form of a tableau, with all the principal characters assembled in one scene, or showing the leading characters alone.

## SURPRISE.

Surprise is one of the most powerful of dramatic effects. An audience may be startled or shocked into a state of breathless interest when no other device would be of the least avail. Surprises are most valuable in comedies, which sometimes consist of little more than a succession of startling incidents. In more serious plays, on the other hand, surprises, unless cleverly handled tend to give the story an abrupt and "jerky" character which is distinctly



unpleasant. The surprise, in such cases, must be in a manner prepared for; the audience must have a dim sense of impending disaster, of some development-to-come, the exact nature of which is left a matter of surmise.

## HUMOR AND PATHOS.

Except in the lightest forms of comedy, the two elements of humor and pathos are always introduced in the modern screen drama. No one any longer thinks of writing pure tragedy for the screen; on the other hand, the most successful comedies are those which have a few touches of genuine pathos.

## IMPLICATION.

Implication is an effective means of creating suspense. An illustration will suffice:

Several characters are shown in a scene. A gentleman enters, and finds himself face to face with one of the characters, a lady. Both start back in surprise, stare at each other for an instant, then, as they recover their composure, bow coldly. Without a word being said, the audience has been told that these two characters have, at some time in the past, sustained relations to each other.

## THE FOUNDATION OF THE PLAY.

The necessary explanations should be introduced as near the beginning of the play as possible, since, if brought in later, when the story is fairly under way, they disrupt the action and dissipate the interest.





## LEADING UP TO THE CLIMAX.

From the foregoing it will readily be apparent that the main object is to involve the hero or heroine in apparently inextricable difficulties, until a point is reached at which there seems to be no chance of escape. All the suspense is centered in one grand situation, the Climax.

The Climax should be the direct consequence of the action that has gone before. When it occurs, the spectators rapidly traverse in their minds the various stages of the play, and seem to find the consequences of those stages in the situation before them.

## THE FALL TO CLOSE.

You have now brought your play to its highest point of interest. But you may not stop here. The story must be complete. It must be carried to a point where there is nothing more to tell. You cannot, therefore, leave your characters suspended in mid-air. You must conduct your story to a satisfactory conclusion, after which your audience will depart in peace --- calm and satisfied. The close, in a photoplay, should come immediately after the climax, as soon as you have straightened out the complications of your situation. A common device is to reserve some effective touch until the very end, and to "iris out" on that.



## THE TECHNIQUE OF PHOTOPLAY WRITING.

The problem of the construction is to get the hero and heroine into difficulties. It must be kept in mind that the suspense must be present, and that it must not be removed until the end, that the causes of the suspense must not all be removed at once, and that as often as one difficulty is taken away another should immediately take its place. For example:

Two men have been imprisoned. They overpower their jailer and make their way through a corridor to a door which they believe will lead them to the street. (The suspense seems about to be relieved.) They open the door, and find themselves in the guard-room of the prison. (A new element of suspense has taken the place of the old one.)

Suspense is the nervous system of a play. In some form or other, it should exist throughout the entire progress of the story. At various points of the play, generally toward the end of each part, it may be partially relieved, but it should always be done in such a way as to give rise to new suspense, or to leave one or two particulars still unsettled. Not until the very end of the play should every item of doubt be cleared away.





## ADAPTING STORIES, NOVELS, ETC.

Not every story that appears in print can be successfully adapted for the screen. The vital point to notice is the action. If the interesting portions of the story or novel depend for their interest, not on what the characters say, but on what they do, the story has Motion Picture possibilities.

Regarding permission to adapt a story or novel for the screen, the usual course of procedure is for the playwright to write to the holder of the copyright, which may be either the author or the publisher of the story which it is desired to adapt. Where the author holds the copyright, if his address be unknown, the publishers will put playwrights in touch with the author. Permission to adapt a story usually is granted on a royalty or profit-sharing basis.

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## CONCLUSION.

In the foregoing we have aimed to show you how to construct your synopsis, and how to arrange your ideas so that your play will have the maximum chance of success. Read carefully the hints given, then go to your nearest Motion Picture Theatre and analyze the play you see there. You will be surprised at the entirely new view-point the reading of the foregoing hints has given you.

Next, imagine a few scenes yourself, link them together, and write a synopsis along the lines laid down. You will be astonished at your own powers of imagination.

When you have written your synopsis from the scenes you have thus imagined, rewrite it. And then rewrite it again, putting more detail into it and embodying in it all the new ideas that will come to you in the process. Never be satisfied with slipshod work; for success depends wholly on your giving the best that is in you.

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